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ABSTRACT

To develop adult learning groups in formal educational settings, the educator must understand the nature of learning in groups. Three types of group learning are instrumental, communicative, and emancipatory. The type of learning that occurs in groups varies according to the learning tasks and goals. Group learning that has as its goal the acquisition of instrumental knowledge is cooperative. The term collaborative describes group learning based on communicative knowledge. Transformative applies to learning groups that seek emancipatory knowledge. Cooperative learning focuses on the learning of individuals; as groups engage in collaborative or transformative learning, the distinction between individual and group learning becomes more invisible. The facilitator fosters, assists, supports, and helps with accomplishing learning tasks by sharing responsibilities with learners; establishes and maintains the group learning environment; and provides information about the group process. The facilitator's roles and responsibilities change to correspond to the group's purposes and goals. Size is an important characteristic of groups, with smaller groups (six or less) being more cohesive and productive. Facilitator-selected groups tend to perform better. Important considerations when structuring group learning for adults are the experience's purpose, an appropriate role for the facilitator, and group formation. (YLB)

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Adult Learning in Groups
Practice Application Brief

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by Susan Imel
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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

Adult Learning In Groups

Groups [can] exert powerful influence both to advance and to obstruct learning. A group can be an environment in which people invent and explore symbolic structures for understanding the world, learning from each other and trying out for themselves the discourse of the domain of knowledge they seek to acquire. Alternatively, groups can encourage conformity, squander time and energy on ritual combat, revel in failure, and generally engage in all sorts of fantasy tasks that have little or nothing to do with learning. (Knights 1993, p. 185)

The use of groups has deep historical roots in adult education, and, if asked, most adult educators would say that learning in groups is a fundamental principle of the field. Adult educators use groups frequently in structuring learning experiences, and groups also form the basis for much informal adult learning both within and outside institutional boundaries. Although group theory once played a major role in shaping the field, the topic of learning in groups has been relatively unexamined in the recent literature. This ***Practice Application Brief*** provides information that can be used in developing adult learning groups in formal educational settings. First, the nature of learning in groups is considered, followed by discussions of the role of the facilitator and forming groups. Guidelines for structuring group learning experiences for adults conclude the *Brief*.

The Nature of Group Learning

Little research exists on how learning occurs in groups (Cranton 1996; Dechant, Marsick, and Kasl 1993). Futhermore, when forming groups, adult educators tend to focus on helping learners work effectively together rather than on helping them understand the learning processes that may be occurring in the group (Dechant, Marsick, and Kasl 1993). By drawing on Habermas' domains of knowledge and interests, Cranton (1996) has developed a helpful way of thinking about how groups can accomplish or facilitate different types of learning. Cranton suggests that there are three types of group learning, each affiliated with the following kinds of knowledge proposed by Habermas—

- instrumental (scientific, cause-and-effect information)
- communicative (mutual understanding and social knowledge)
- emancipatory (increased self-awareness and transformation of experience)

As outlined by Cranton, the type of learning that occurs in groups varies according to the learning tasks and goals. Group learning that has as its goal the acquisition of instrumental knowledge is called *cooperative*. In cooperative learning groups, "the focus is on the subject matter rather than on the interpersonal process . . . [although] the strengths, experiences, and expertise of individual group members can contribute to the learning of the group as a whole" (ibid., p. 26). The term *collaborative* describes group learning that is based on communicative knowledge. Because communicative knowledge is sought, collaborative learning groups emphasize process and participants exchange ideas, feelings, and information in arriving at knowledge that is acceptable to each group member. *Transformative* applies to learning groups that seek emancipatory knowledge. In transformative learning groups, members engage in critical reflection as a means of examining their expectations, assumptions, and perspectives.

Another question related to the nature of learning in groups is whose purposes should the learning serve—the individual's or the group's? In other words, should the group foster the learning of individual members or should the group as an entity learn? With some types of group learning—for example, cooperative as described by Cranton (1996)—the focus is explicitly on the learning of individual group members. As groups engage in collaborative or transformative learning, however, the distinction between individual learning and group learning becomes more invisible. Even when group members jointly produce knowledge, that knowledge may be used by an individual (as well as by the group). In such cases, both the group and the individual learn, making it more difficult to distinguish which purposes are served by the learning (Imel 1996).

The Role of the Facilitator

When group learning is used in adult education, the teacher or instructor is usually referred to as a *facilitator*. Use of the term facilitator to describe the individual in charge of an instructional setting carries with it certain expectations about how this person will carry out his or her role. Usually, a facilitator is expected to foster, assist, support and/or help with accomplishing the learning tasks by sharing responsibility with the learners. In addition, the facilitator is expected to establish and maintain the group learning environment and provide information about how members will work as a group (group process). Varying perspectives exist, however, about how these roles should be performed. (ibid.).

Cranton (1996) suggests that the roles and responsibilities of the facilitator change to correspond to the group's purposes and goals. In cooperative learning groups, for example, the facilitator develops exercises and activities and manages time and resources. In collaborative and transformative learning groups, however, the facilitator is more of an equal partner in the learning, although in collaborative learning groups, the facilitator must assume the responsibility for maintaining the group process. Heimlich (1996) disagrees with those who "interpret the concept of facilitator as being equal to the learners of the group . . . [suggesting that] although the adult educator is always a potential learner in the teaching-learning exchange, someone must be willing to bring to the group the ideas or issues the group may choose to avoid" (p. 42). Heimlich also views the facilitator as being the one responsible for constructing learning activities and managing their implementation, which is quite similar to how Cranton sees the facilitator's role in cooperative group learning.

Because adult education draws heavily from the humanistic perspective, those acting as facilitators may feel responsible for looking after and supporting students and for solving all problems related to the group. Knights (1993) suggests that providing too much support can help learners avoid "the pain of learning" (p. 196), adding that group members can look after one another. Foley (1992) warns that, because too many things related to the group are outside their control, facilitators should

not fall into the trap of thinking "that for every facilitation problem, there is an appropriate technique that can be applied, if only one is experienced and competent enough" (pp. 158-159).

Forming Groups

Among the many considerations when forming learning groups are group size and membership. Size is an important characteristic of groups. The consensus among group theorists is that smaller groups, those of six or less, tend to be more cohesive and productive than larger groups. Even in a class of 8-12 learners, therefore, forming two small subgroups might produce better results for some learning tasks (Imel and Tisdell 1996).

"Although theory speaks conclusively about the importance of size, it is not so explicit about the question of learners choosing or being assigned to groups" (ibid., p. 19). Because of the voluntary nature of adult education, facilitators may choose to let learners form their own subgroups, making selections on the basis of preexisting relationships and/or topic. Allowing learners to select their groups may not produce the most effective learning outcomes, however. A study (Butterfield and Bailey 1996) with upper division and master's level business students (with a mean age of 24) compared self-selected groups with groups that were designed by the researchers "on the basis of overt or readily identifiable differences to create diversity on such factors as sex, national origin, race, academic background and so on" (p. 104). Groups were given task assignments that required both cognitive evaluation and judgment. Groups selected by the researchers performed significantly better than the self-selected groups, leading the researchers to conclude that "engineering the group composition provides an opportunity to improve the educational process by taking advantage of the diversity that naturally exists in the class" (p. 105). They did find, however, that members of the self-selected groups perceived their group process to be democratic more frequently than did the members assigned to groups by the researchers.

Struoturing Group Learning for Adults

When structuring adult learning groups, the nature of group learning, the facilitator's role, and considerations about forming groups all intersect. Questions to consider when implementing group learning in adult settings include the following—

- **What purpose is the group learning experience designed to achieve?** For example, is the goal related to developing relationships among the participants, is it focused on acquiring a certain type of knowledge, or both? The answer to this question will affect all other decisions about the learning group. As described by Cranton (1996), the type of learning in which groups engage affects the role of the facilitator, the relationships that learners are likely to form with one another and with the facilitator, and the type of knowledge that is produced.
- **What is an appropriate role for the faciliatator?** Once the goals and purposes of the learning group are determined, the facilitator's role will be more evident. Certain types of group learning may carry certain expectations about how facilitators are to function, but faciltators may choose to adapt their roles because of their personal characteristics or the particular context in which the group is operating. For example, in some transformative learning situations, facilitators may need to step out of their role of colearner in order to deal with power issues that arise among learners (Imel and Tisdell 1996). Also, facilitators need to remember that their roles have limits and that too many factors lie outside their influence for them to control all outcomes (Foley 1992; Knights 1993).
- **How should groups be formed?** Again, the goals and purposes of the learning group will shape decisions about forming groups. Size considerations are important since research demonstrates that small groups are more effective. However, the size of the entire group or the learning task may affect decisions about the number of small groups and their size. A more difficult question related to forming groups revolves around how group membership should be constituted. Again, the learning tasks and the learners will have a bearing on how this desicion is made. Among the questions to be considered are the following: Is the learning group formed only for the purpose of accomplishing a very short and specific task or will it be ongoing? Are the learners well acquainted already? Do learners possess observable or easily obtainable characteristics that could be used to form heterogeneous groups? How important is it that members perceive the group process to be democratic? For example, Butterfield and Bailey (1996) suggest that a self-selection process may work better when equal contribution of members is more important than output quality.

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